

Student Perceptions of Zoom as an Emergency Remote Teaching Platform

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Student Perceptions of Zoom as an Emergency Remote Teaching Platform

Barry CONDON & Mark DONNELLAN

The Covid-19 pandemic heralded a paradigm shift in the method by which students received EFL instruction. Communication tools such as Zoom, originally designed for business meetings, suddenly became ubiquitous in education. In order to assess the value of Zoom as a classroom meeting tool, a survey was designed by the researchers and completed by 326 students in the Kwansai Gakuin Intensive English program during the final week of the spring 2020 semester. This paper provides a descriptive analysis of the frequencies of responses of that survey. Overall, the results indicate a generally favorable view of Zoom, with most students agreeing that it facilitated adequate opportunities to communicate both with classmates and their teachers. Group discussions and presentations were cited as the most useful activities. Negative aspects of the Zoom experience included some discomfort with having cameras switched on throughout lessons, connectivity and hardware issues, and fatigue.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Within a week, governments in 107 countries across the world had implemented national school closures, affecting 862 million students (Viner et al., 2020). In Japan, where public schools had already been closed since February 27th, universities began announcing a switch to emergency remote teaching (ERT). The decision made by Kwansai Gakuin University's Language Center in mid-March to conduct classes remotely presented challenges for both teachers and students alike. Courses designed for face-to-face instruction had to be adapted in a short space of time and taught using platforms, applications and other IT tools that had been rarely used up to that time. Chief among these technologies was the video conferencing platform Zoom, which although predominantly designed for the business sector, became the most widely used conferencing tool in education (Menard, 2020).

A typical single-semester (15-16 week) online course often requires that same amount of time in design and development (Golden, 2020). This is supported by Hodges et al. (2020) who contends that a timeframe of between

six to nine months in planning is necessary before an online course can be delivered and a further two or three iterations before instructors are comfortable with the format. However, a distinction should be drawn between ERT and traditional online teaching. ERT is short-term and aimed at substituting missed face-to-face instruction during a crisis and thus, is “a temporary solution to an immediate problem” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020) and not an attempt at creating “a robust educational ecosystem” (Hodges, 2020).

In their review of the literature relating to online teaching and learning practices, Carillo and Flores (2020) listed the following factors as being integral to the success of an online course:

1. Interaction between students within a supportive learning environment.
2. Avoiding a sense of isolation among students.
3. Collaboration within small groups.
4. Students having ownership of discussions.
5. The strong social presence of the teacher.
6. The teacher acting as facilitator rather than the transferor of knowledge.
7. Student dedication, motivation and preparedness.
8. Access to reliable hardware, software, and connectivity.

Early studies of the reaction of students to ERT classes have shown mixed results. Students were glad to learn in a comfortable and safe environment, avoiding the need to commute, and expressed satisfaction with the facility to communicate in real time (Shim & Lee, 2020). In the same study, students expressed dissatisfaction with several aspects of ERT including reduced interaction with peers, inability to concentrate, increased fatigue levels, a lack of feedback from teachers, and an increased workload. These same factors were cited by students as causes of increased stress and anxiety levels and feelings of being overwhelmed (Bidwell, Grether and Pederson, 2020). The students in Gillis and Krull’s (2020) study reported internet connectivity issues as being a significant barrier to effective participation in Zoom sessions. Participants in another study (Huang, Shi, & Yang, 2020) cited the reduced social presence of the teacher in ERT-conducted classes as a possible reason for other students to disengage and thereby reduce the quality of the lessons. Additionally, students noted that class size was inversely proportional to the amount of feedback each student was likely to receive from their teacher, a problem supported by Hodges et al. (2020).

With specific regard to live Zoom lectures and live Zoom discussions, Gillis and Krull (2020) recorded generally positive reactions from students in terms of their accessibility and effectiveness while reactions were somewhat less positive regarding enjoyability. Students’ responses to Zoom as a teaching platform were similarly favorable in a separate study (Almusharraf & Khahro,

2020), although another conferencing tool, Cisco Webex, garnered slightly more positive responses.

In advance of conducting this survey, and based on their own experiences using Zoom as an ERT platform, the researchers' hypotheses were as follows:

1. Most students would express a preference for face-to-face classes over Zoom sessions.
2. Most students would feel that face-to-face classes were more likely to lead to improvement than Zoom sessions.
3. Most students would agree that they had adequate opportunities to communicate in English.
4. Most students would feel that they did not have adequate access to their teacher.
5. Most students would cite technical issues as being a barrier to learning during Zoom sessions.
6. Most students would consider Zoom sessions to be more tiring than face-to-face classes.
7. Most students would consider group discussions the most useful activity conducted through Zoom.

RESEARCH METHOD

Survey

The survey used in this study was designed by the researchers based on the extant literature on online learning and their experience of emergency remote teaching. The elements of successful online learning enumerated in Carillo and Flores (2020) are reflected in the survey questions of this study (see Table 1).

In order to encourage as many frank responses as possible, the survey was anonymous. To ensure comprehensibility, the questions were written in easy-to-understand English. The first question determined the participants' major field of study. Questions 2 and 3 ascertained the frequency and duration of Zoom sessions during the spring 2020 semester. Questions 4 to 13 sought students' opinions on Zoom as a conferencing platform in place of face-to-face classes using a 4-point Likert scale. This scale was chosen, with a mid-point deliberately omitted, in the expectation of achieving more definitive results (Dornyei and Taguchi, 2009). Questions 14-17 asked what type of activities were conducted through Zoom and which activities the respondents considered to be the most and least useful. The final question was an optional and open-ended request for any further comments on using Zoom. The responses to this question were coded and grouped into themes.

TABLE 1
Factors affecting the success of an online course (Carillo & Flores, 2020)

#	Factors affecting the success of an online course	Survey question number
1	Interaction between students within a supportive learning environment.	4,7,8,9
2	Avoiding a sense of isolation among students.	4
3	Collaboration within small groups.	7,8,9
4	Students having ownership of discussions.	7,8,9
5	The strong social presence of the teacher.	11
6	The teacher acting as facilitator rather than the transferor of knowledge.	11
7	Student dedication, motivation and preparedness.	7,8
8	Access to reliable hardware, software and connectivity.	6

Participants

The participants for this study were enrolled in the Intensive English (IE) program, meeting three times each week over a fourteen-week term, at Kwansai Gakuin University. The IE program comprises 30 classes and approximately 650 students with TOEIC scores ranging from 385 to 955. The survey was made available in July 2020 as students were entering the final week of their second semester in the program, the first semester having been conducted in a traditional face-to-face class environment. A total of 326 students responded: 74 from Business Administration, 49 from Economics, 19 from Human Welfare Studies, 86 from Humanities, 56 Law and Politics, 36 from Sociology, and 6 from Theology.

TABLE 2
Results of Likert Scale Questions

Survey question number	Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
4	The Zoom sessions offered me adequate opportunities to speak English.	0	11.7	61.0	27.3
5	I felt comfortable having my camera switched on.	6.7	25.5	46.0	21.8
6	Technical issues (slow Wi-Fi, poor sound quality etc.) were a significant problem.	11.7	24.2	38.0	26.1
7	My classmates tried their hardest during breakout room activities.	1.8	17.2	52.1	28.8
8	I tried my hardest during breakout room activities.	1.5	12.9	49.7	35.9
9	Breakout rooms are an important part of Zoom sessions.	0.3	5.8	35.3	58.6
10	Zoom sessions are more tiring than regular face-to-face classes.	12.3	30.7	36.8	20.2
11	I had sufficient access to my teacher during Zoom sessions.	3.7	19.6	54.9	21.8
12	I prefer Zoom sessions to regular face-to-face classes.	34.7	36.2	20.6	8.6
13	Students are more likely to improve their English from Zoom sessions than face-to-face classes.	22.1	48.8	23.6	5.5

The number of Zoom sessions held each week (maximum 3) and the duration of each session (maximum 90 minutes) varied according to the course design of each teacher. From the results, 30.1% of students reported meeting once a week on average, 14.7% met for two sessions, and 54.9% indicated that they had met on Zoom three times. Additionally, 15% of students reported

spending 60 minutes or less in Zoom sessions over the course of a week, 37.4% of students estimated their time spent on Zoom as being between 60 minutes and 120 minutes, 12.3% reported their session time being between 120 minutes and 180 minutes, and the remaining 35.3% spending between 180 minutes up to the maximum available time of 270 minutes in Zoom sessions.

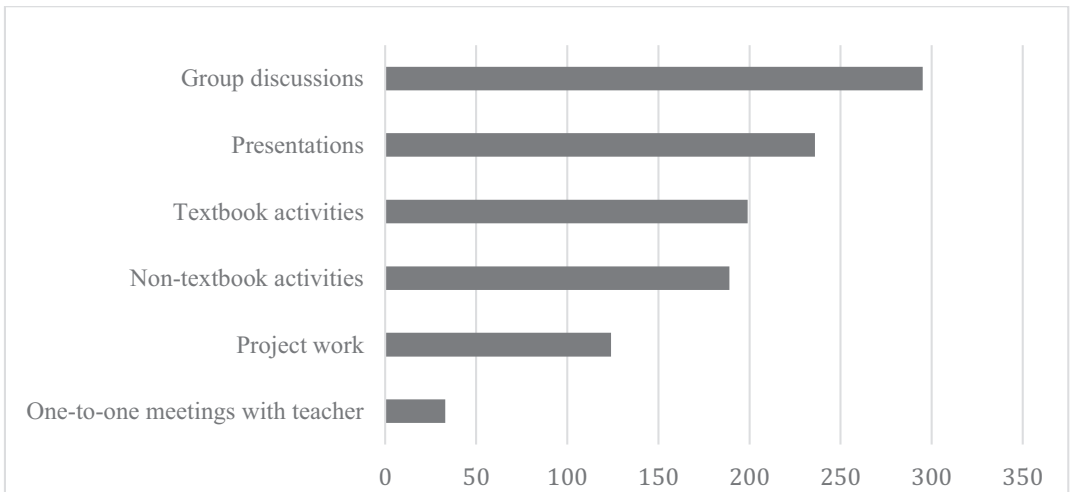
TABLE 3
Average Number of Zooms Sessions and Minutes Spent in Zoom Sessions Each Week

Average number of Zoom sessions held each week			Average number of minutes spent in Zoom sessions each week		
<u>Sessions</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Minutes</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1	99	30.4	0-60	49	15.0
2	48	14.7	60-120	122	37.4
3	179	54.9	120-180	40	12.3
Total	326	100.0	180-270	155	35.3
			Total	326	100.0

Regarding Question 4, a majority of students (61% agree, 27.3% strongly agree) expressed having adequate opportunities to communicate in English with only 11.7% disagreeing and no students disagreeing strongly. A total of 32.2% of students indicated their disagreement with the statement *I felt comfortable having my camera switched on*, of which, 6.7% were in strong disagreement while 46% agreed and the remaining 21.8% agreed strongly. A majority of those surveyed agreed (38.0%) or strongly agreed (26.1%) that technical issues were a significant problem during Zoom sessions. A comparable number agreed (36.8%) or strongly agreed (20.2%) that Zoom sessions are more tiring than face-to-face classes. With regard to breakout rooms, 93.9% of respondents agreed that they are an important part of Zoom sessions with only 5.8% disagreeing and 0.3% strongly disagreeing. Most students believed (52.1% agreed, 28.8% strongly agreed) that their classmates tried their hardest during breakout room activities while a slightly higher number (49.7% agreed, 35.9% strongly agreed) that they themselves had tried their hardest. A total of 76.7% of students (54.9% agreed, 21.8% strongly agreed) with the statement *I had sufficient access to my teacher during Zoom sessions* while 19.6% of students disagreed with the same statement and a further 3.7% indicated strong disagreement. On the question pertaining to Zoom

sessions being preferable to face-to-face classes, 70.9% of students expressed disagreement (36.2% disagreed, 34.7% strongly disagreed). Of the remaining students, 20.6% agreed and 8.6% strongly agreed with the statement. An equally high proportion of students (70.9%) disagreed (48.8%) or disagreed strongly (22.1%) that students are more likely to improve their English from Zoom sessions than from face-to-face classes.

FIGURE 1
Distribution of Responses to the Question: How Was Zoom Used in Your Class?



In order of frequency, the activities conducted in Zoom sessions were as follows: group discussions (295), presentations (236), textbook activities (199), non-textbook activities (189) followed by project work (124) with one-to-one meetings with teachers being the least commonly reported activity. Of those activities, from 210 responses, students indicated that group discussions (113) and presentations (49) were the most useful. Regarding the activities that were considered the least useful, from the total of 126 responses received, 51 students chose textbook activities, 21 students chose presentations, and 19 students chose group discussions; 8 students chose projects; 7 students chose non-textbook activities; 3 students chose one-to-one meetings with their teacher. The remaining 17 responses fell outside the classifications.

DISCUSSION

The results point towards generally positive views of Zoom and how it was used by IE teachers as an ERT platform over the spring 2020 semester. With only one exception – most students did, in fact, feel they had sufficient access to their teacher - the researchers’ hypotheses were supported by the results. Most participants felt that the Zoom sessions allowed them enough opportunities to communicate in English, and nearly three quarters of the respondents felt they had sufficient access to their teachers. Although the results appear to indicate a correlation between time spent in Zoom sessions and satisfaction with communication opportunities and teacher access, a significant number of students who reported fewer meetings and less time spent in sessions expressed similar levels of satisfaction.

FIGURE 2
Cross-tabulation of Average Number of Zoom Sessions per Week against Satisfaction with Opportunities to Speak English

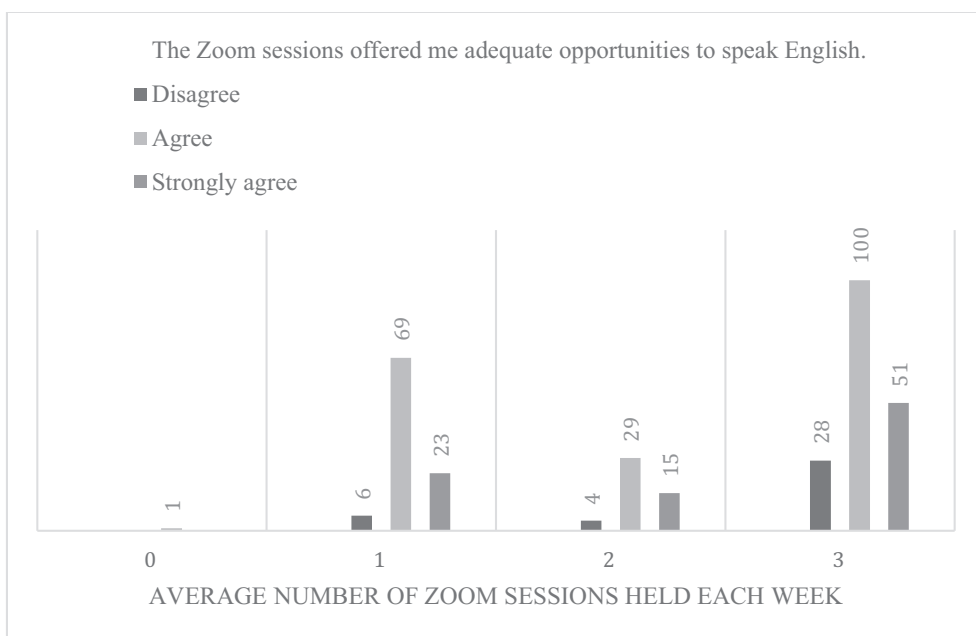


FIGURE 3
Cross-tabulation of Average Time Spent in Zoom Sessions per Week
against Satisfaction with Opportunities to Speak English

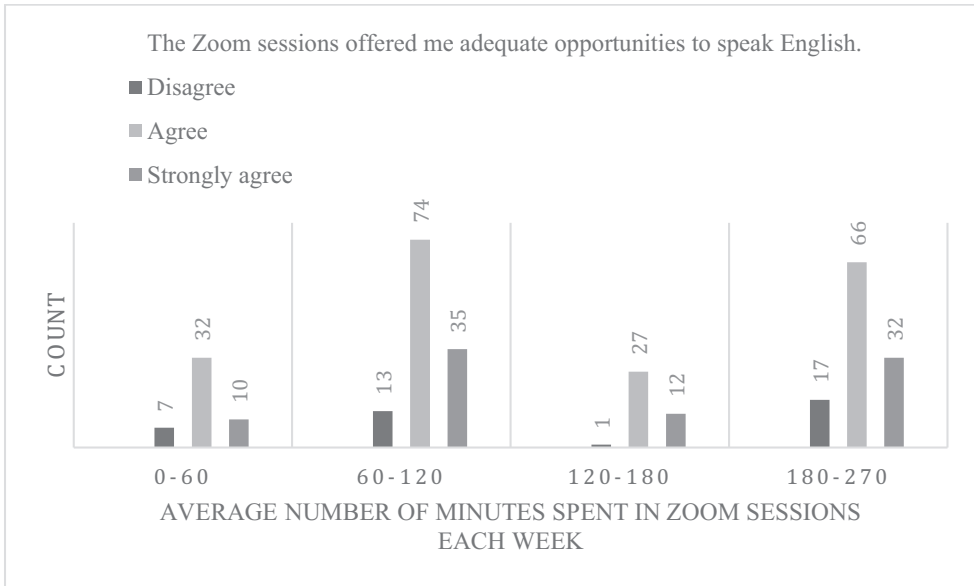


FIGURE 4
Cross-tabulation of Average Time Spent per Week in Zoom Sessions
against Satisfaction with Access to Teacher during Zoom Sessions

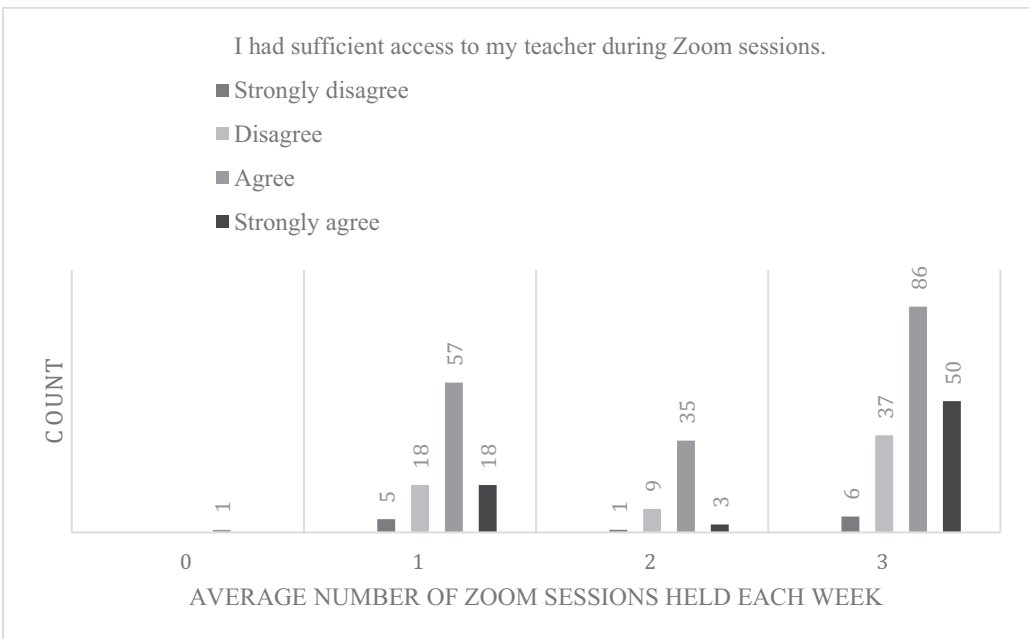


FIGURE 5
Cross-tabulation of Zoom Sessions being Preferable to Face-to-Face
Classes against Technical Issues Being Considered a Significant Problem

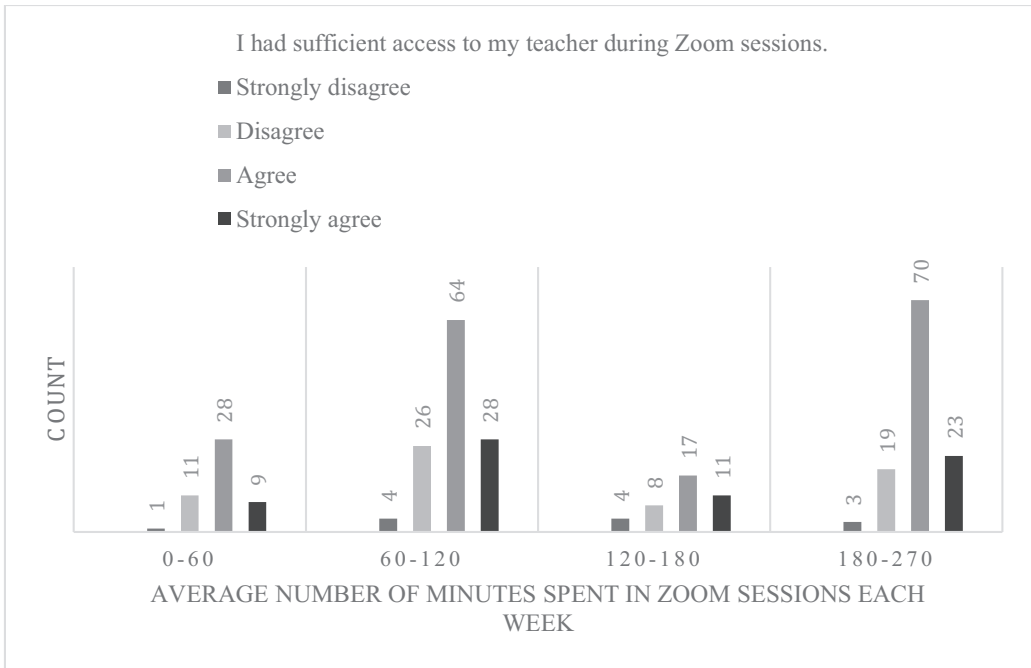
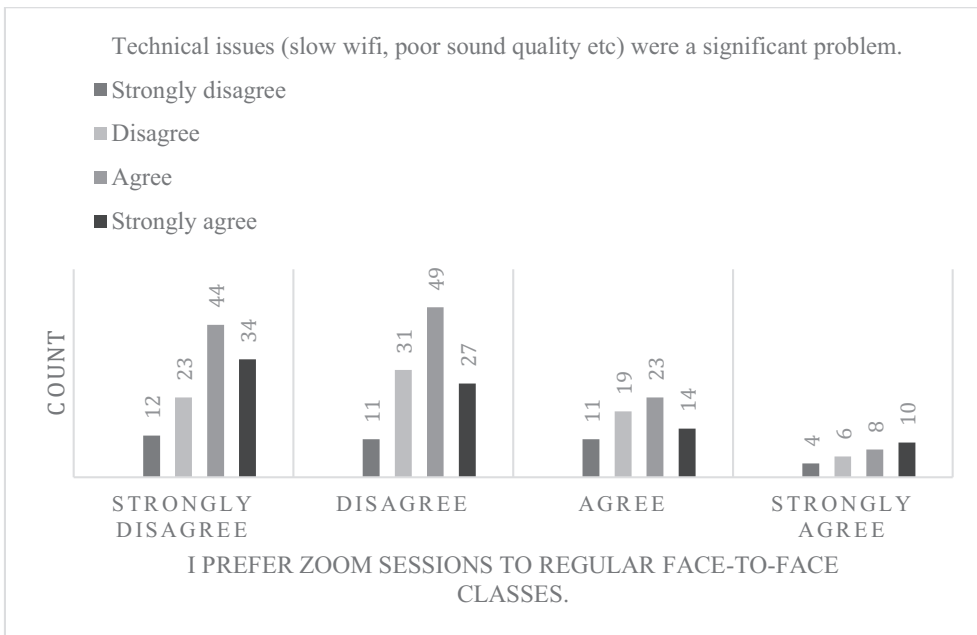


FIGURE 6
Cross-tabulation of Zoom Sessions being Preferable to Face-to-Face
Classes against Technical Issues Being Considered a Significant Problem



CONCLUSION

The responses to the survey indicate general satisfaction with Zoom as an emergency remote teaching tool. Perhaps most importantly, most students agreed that it facilitated adequate opportunities to communicate in English and allowed for sufficient access to their teachers. Interestingly, a sizable minority of students expressed both satisfaction with opportunities for communication and access to teachers despite not spending the full amount of scheduled class time in Zoom sessions. This, coupled with the increased feeling of fatigue brought on by Zoom sessions, might indicate that the ideal session frequency and/or duration of Zoom sessions is somewhat less than face-to-face classes and ERT Zoom sessions should be planned accordingly. Breakout rooms were viewed by a considerable majority as being an integral part of the lessons conducted on the platform. The most common activities conducted through Zoom, group discussion work and presentations, were also considered by many students to be the two most useful with textbook activities faring less well. These responses offer clues as to what activities best suit the Zoom format and may assist teachers in their planning for future courses.

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